

To: Chairman and Members  
2007 Montana Legislature  
House Judiciary Committee

From: Regional Trauma Centers of Billings, Montana  
▪ St. Vincent Healthcare  
▪ Billings Clinic  
Emergency Nurses Association/Montana Chapter

Thank you for allowing us to present our testimony and opinions in support of Senate Bill 300, which would create a primary seat belt law for the state of Montana. Our position has 4 salient points:

- Deaths and disabilities due to injuries sustained by occupants who are in motor vehicle crashes and are not wearing seat belts are a public health crisis for Montana. Montana is second only to Wyoming in the incidence of traumatic brain injury with the majority of the injuries sustained in crashes when the victim is ejected or partially ejected from the vehicle. Montana had the highest fatality rate in the nation due to motor vehicle crashes in 2005. Trauma remains the number one killer of Montanans between the ages of 4 and 34 and motor vehicle crashes are the most frequent mechanism of injury.
- Montanans who aren't wearing seat belts when they are in a motor vehicle crash are injured more severely and are seven times more likely to require hospitalization and subsequent rehabilitation. When admitted, the hospital charges are 2.4 times greater than crash victims who were restrained.
- The cost of unbelted motor vehicle crash trauma is borne by all Montanans, with more people added annually to the Medicaid roles, more people on disability, more unreimbursed care and financial shortfalls for hospitals providing trauma care, and resulting higher health insurance and auto insurance costs for citizens and businesses in Montana.
- Driving is a privilege, not a right. The rights of Montanans are those things to which they are entitled simply as a process of being Montana and US citizens. The exercise of a true right does not infringe on the rights of others. Driving requires education, testing, insurance, and adherence to safe operating rules as a method of reducing the risk of injury to all those traveling the road. Seat belts are as important to safe operation of a vehicle as are obeying the rules of the road. A primary seat belt law supports Montana's already existing mandatory seat belt law, reinforcing the behavior change that is needed for this and future generations of Montanans to reduce the incidence of motor vehicle crash death and disability.

Dr. Dennis Maier MD  
Trauma Medical Director  
St. Vincent Healthcare

Dr. Robert Hurd MD  
Trauma Medical Director  
Billings Clinic

Dr. Jim Bentler MD  
Emergency Physician  
St. Vincent Healthcare

Penny Clifton RN  
Trauma Program Coord.  
St. Vincent Healthcare

# Injury and Death in Motor Vehicle Crashes and Financial Impact of the lack of Vehicle Restraint Usage on the State of Montana

*Prepared for the House Judiciary Committee  
2007 Montana State Legislature*

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## Data Sources

- 2005 Montana State Trauma Data Bank: a compilation of trauma registry data submitted by hospitals throughout Montana
- Spinal Cord Information Network
- CODES Project: Yellowstone County
- NHTSA: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
- Trauma Registry/St. Vincent Healthcare/Billings, MT
- Trauma Registry/Billings Clinic/Billings MT

### *2005 Montana State Trauma Data Bank*

- 251 deaths in motor vehicle crashes; 73% or 152 were unrestrained This was the worst fatality rate in the nation in 2005
- 71% of those injured were unrestrained
- 23 motor vehicle crash victims with spinal cord injuries/61% were unrestrained
- Trauma remains the leading cause of death for Montanans between the ages of 4 and 34
  - The primary mechanism of injury is motor vehicle crashes

### *Spinal Cord Information Network*

- Lifetime costs of medical care for
  - Quadriplegic = \$2,924,513 (\$741,425 in 1<sup>st</sup> year)
  - Paraplegic = \$977,142

### *CODES project/Yellowstone County 2003*

- Average hospital charges for victims admitted after motor vehicle crash
  - With seat belt = \$20,709
  - Without belt = \$48,692
  - Unbelted persons 7.3 times more likely to require hospital admission
- Estimated lives that could have been saved by belts = 13
- Estimated number of prevented hospitalizations = 142 at a savings of \$7,000,000

### ***National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA)***

- Seat belt use (lap and shoulder) reduces the risk of death by 45% and the risk of moderate to severe injury by 50%
- Primary seat belt laws exist in 25 states
- Observed seat belt use in states with primary laws = 85%
- Observed seat belt use in states without primary laws = 75%
- Montana's observed seat belt use = 79%
- Montana's annual cost due to motor vehicle crashes = \$621 million.
- Enacting a primary seatbelt law typically increases observed seat belt use by 10-11 percentage points over two (2) years
- Increasing Montana's seat belt use to 90% would save 20-30 lives and an estimated \$113.6 million a year.

### ***Trauma Registry St. Vincent Healthcare***

- 2005 Motor vehicle crash victims hospitalized
  - Unbelted = 97
    - 6 died; 25 discharged to rehab or skilled nursing facility
  - Belted = 50
    - 1 died; 8 discharged to rehab or skilled nursing facility
- Unbelted patients were over twice as likely to be uninsured and required Medicaid application during their stay
- Reimbursement deficit in 2005 for care provided to unbelted victims
  - \$2,228,657.00 (\$23,000 per patient)

### ***Trauma Registry Billings Clinic***

- Hospital days for belted patients = average 4 days per patient
- Hospital days for unbelted patients = average 8 days per patient